

VZCZCXRO8087
RR RUEHBC RUEHDA RUEHDBU RUEHDE RUEHGI RUEHKUK RUEHLH RUEHPW
DE RUEHROV #0211/01 2761343
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 031343Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY VATICAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0509
INFO RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 0057
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE
RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0537

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000211

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EUR/EX/WE FOR JLARREA

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [SOCI](#) [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [VT](#) [IT](#)
SUBJECT: ROME'S INTER-FAITH MEETING

VATICAN 00000211 001.4 OF 002

11. Summary: Rome's mayor Walter Veltroni hosted an inter-faith meeting on September 19 attended by Cardinal Paul Poupard, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue; Sami Salem, Imam of Rome's Grand Mosque; Abdallah Redouane, Secretary-General of Rome's Islamic Cultural Centre; Riccardo Di Segni, Rome's Chief Rabbi; Leone Paserman, President of Rome's Jewish community; and Andrea Riccardi, co-founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio. The meeting, which was originally planned to launch an interfaith magazine' did much to address recent tensions between the Christian and Muslim worlds. End Summary.

12. Cardinal Paul Poupard, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, was the most anticipated speaker of the event. He began his address by acknowledging that it was a "difficult, very difficult moment," referring to the days following Pope Benedict's September 12 lecture in Germany which offended Muslims. Cardinal Poupard said that the Pope's recent 'clarification' on Sunday, September 17 was "sincere." He emphasized that the Pope has great respect for Islam and is firmly "engaged in dialogue with Islam." He explained that that dialogue is taking place in Rome, but also at the local church level in all countries. He concluded with, "It is difficult, but a dialogue of truth on the different traditions and religions is necessary. The Pope says it is necessary to move forward with truth, and with great respect and self-critical dialogue."

13. Sitting on the other side of the podium from Cardinal Poupard was Sami Salem, Imam of Rome's Grand Mosque, and a recent arrival from Cairo. He opened his remarks with a greeting in Arabic and moved quickly to underline that he was sending a message of reconciliation to the

world by
his presence at the meeting. "We are always ready for dialogue,
for
living together, and in the current moment, we have a great
occasion to do
this," he said. He explained that dialogue can not be simply a
word, "but
it should be a pact." He concluded by saying, "In this very,
very
difficult moment, it is necessary to develop dialogue, to come
to know each
other. ~We have to work to explain points of view of other
religions." In
light of Christian-Muslim relations, he recently offered to the
media an
unkind comparison of Benedict XVI to Pope John Paul II.

¶4. The speaker receiving the most robust applause from the
packed hall was
Secretary-General of Rome's Islamic Cultural Centre, Abdallah

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Redouane. He
stated that the Koran calls for the three monotheistic faiths to
dialogue,
underlining that there is always a need for more professional
dialogue and
leaders. He said this approach is not a privilege, but a
responsibility.
"There needs to be participation in logic and willingness,
between
individuals and society. There is great tension today and the
results have
been monstrous." He went on to say that the Pope's words at the
Sunday,
September 17 Angelus had been "sincere" and he had
"satisfaction." He said
"Cardinal Poupard is here as a strong symbol from the Vatican
for a future
with confidence, a future with dialogue~dialogue on jihad,
serene and with

VATICAN 00000211 002.4 OF 002

mutual respect." He finished with saying, "there aren't
options; we die or
we dialogue."

¶5. The meeting ended with a symbolic gesture as the participants
left the
dais for a lingering group handshake, much appreciated by the
throng of
media present, and seemingly the brainchild of media savvy Mayor
Veltroni.

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